ISSN 0712-7774

CEREBUS GOING HOME 5

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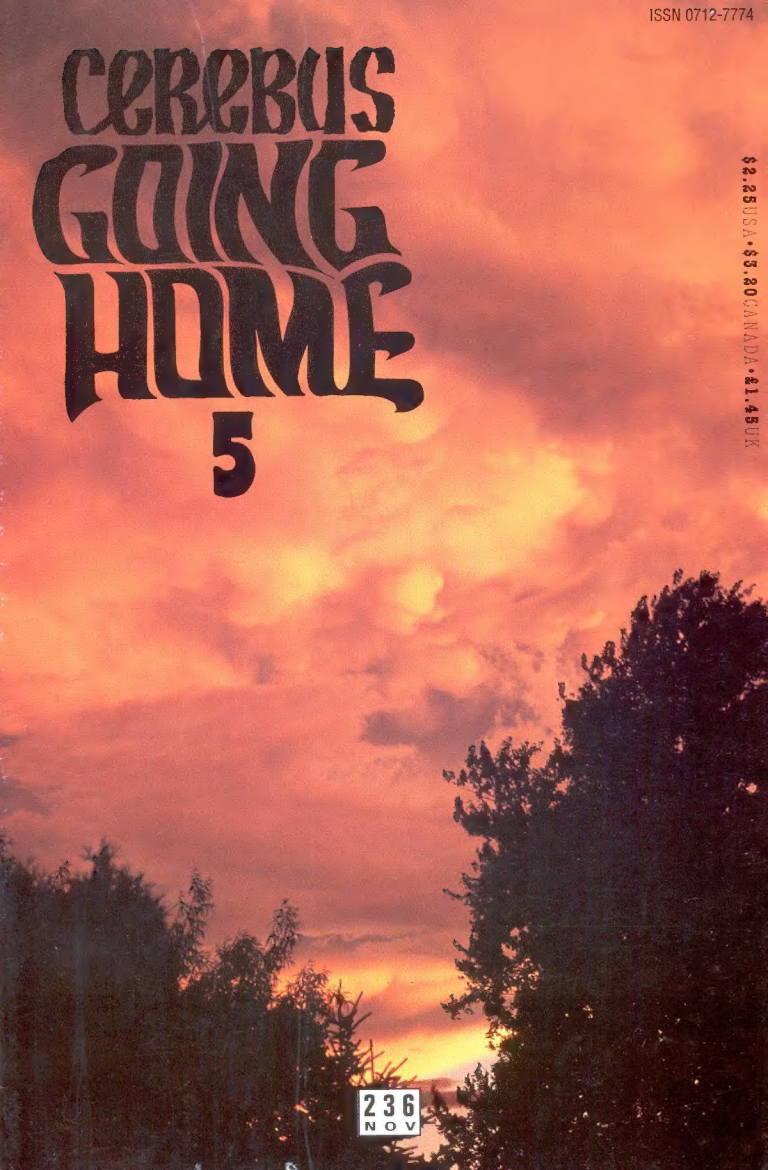

236 NOV

SAMMY'S

I was out at Sammy's Garage, a bar in town, hanging out with my pal Joe White (a.k.a. Joe Boo, for some reason), and we had had a few. Joe takes a long, slow look around at the place, which is starting to fill up nicely.

"I think," Joe says in his Western Canadian drawl, "we should mosey around and check things out."

I gave it a little consideration and nodded.

"I think you're right."

So I grab my beer and my smokes, and, stepping into the lead, I start walking over toward the patio. All of a sudden a big boot kicks me in the ass. What the hell? I turn around and there's Joe, and he says, drawling again, "I said... *mosey.*"

Words to live by, guys. If you're in a bar, don't walk. Mosey.

Funny that when I told Joe that I was going to write about it and put it on the inside front cover here, he had absolutely no recollection of the incident at all.

But, then, like I said — we had had a few.

* * * * * * * * *

L'IL AINJIL

Okay, Gerhard is standing by to send this issue to the printer and I really want to get back to page 17 of issue 238, but Diana just faxed congratulations on my winning an Ignatz Award at this year's Small Press Expo in Bethesda. Ger just stuck his head in, ("Don't you want to find out what the award was *for* before you write your 'thank you'?"). Uhhh...

Oh, heck no! Where's the fun in that?

Besides, I always wanted to steal the best acceptance speech I ever heard which was given by Jeff Smith at the Eisner Awards way back when the earth was still cooling. As I recall it goes like this:

"Thanks."

Okay, back to work.

See you all next issue.

CEREBUS

NO. 236 NOVEMBER 1998

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GOING HOME

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(Cerebus 232 to Cerebus 265)

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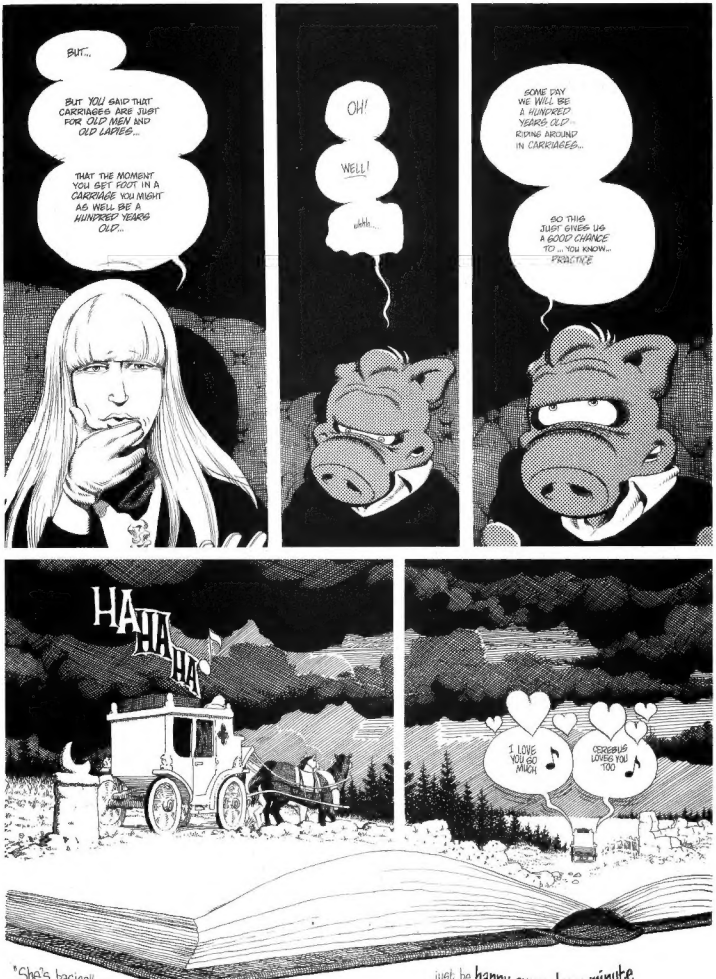
Serv
n
Hoffam Bluffs
District One
Ranch Road
District Two
District Four
Service Road
n
rict

CHE
SNAP

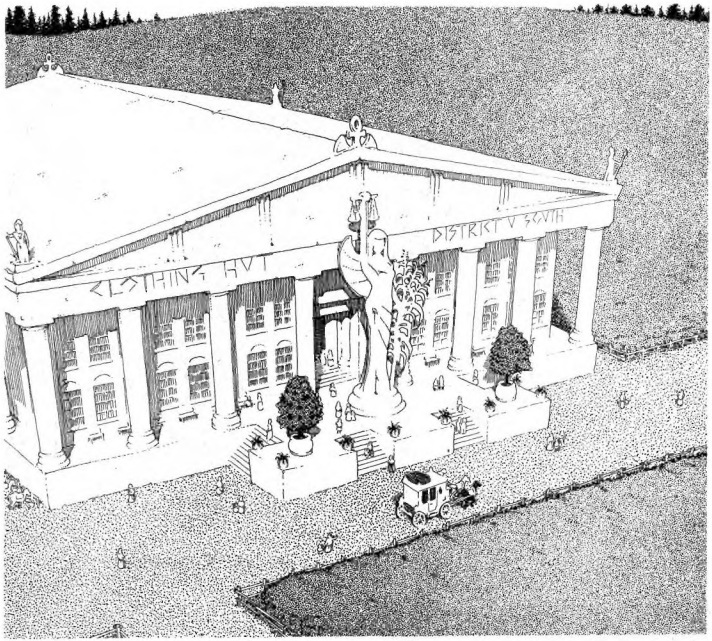
IT'S JUST...
WRONG
SOMEHOW...

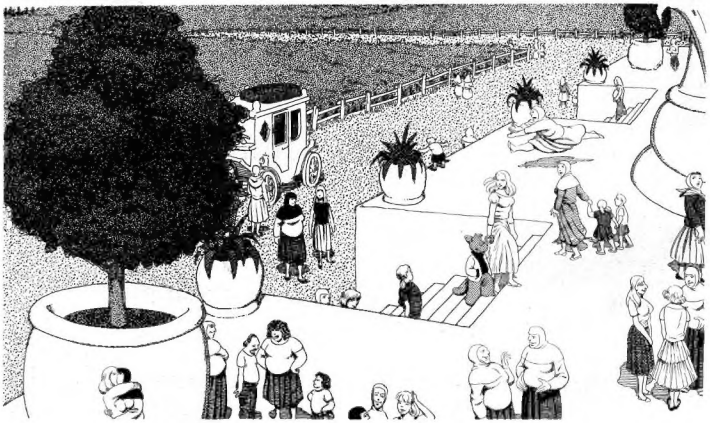
WRONG?
HOW DO YOU MEAN?
DRAGGING YOU BACK DOWN SOUTH INSTEAD OF...
HEH HEH HEH
LOOK
NAY NAY NAY... CERBERUS JUST WASN'T THINKING STRAIGHT
SAND HILLS CREEK HAS BEEN THERE FOR HUNDREDS OF YEARS
THERE'S NO REASON WE HAVE TO GET THERE THIS SUMMER
WE'LL TAKE CARRIAGES BACK DOWN TO MORESH...
SPEND WHAT'S LEFT OF THE SUMMER AND EARLY FALL SAILING DOWN THE FELD RIVER TO WHERE I'ST USED TO BE
SPEND THE REST OF THE FALL HIKING UP THE CHEGIM RIVER TRAIL -- WHERE THERE ARE LOTS OF TAVERNS AND CLOTHING HUTS...
FIND A NICE HUNTING LODGE TO HOLE UP IN FOR THE WINTER
AND THEN HEAD UP TO THE GODS' FENCE IN THE SPRING
THE IMPORTANT THING IS THAT WE'RE TOGETHER
BUMP!

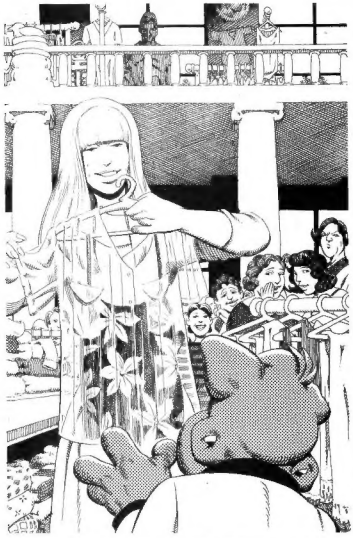

BUT...
BUT YOU SAID THAT CARRIAGES ARE JUST FOR OLD MEN AND OLD LADIES...
THAT THE MOMENT YOU SET FOOT IN A CARRIAGE YOU MIGHT AS WELL BE A HUNDRED YEARS OLD...
OH!
WELL!
uhhh...
SOME DAY WE WILL BE A HUNDRED YEARS OLD - RIDING AROUND IN CARRIAGES...
SO THIS JUST GIVES US A GOOD CHANCE TO ... YOU KNOW... PRACTICE
HAHAHA
I LOVE YOU SO MUCH
CERBERUS LOVES YOU TOO

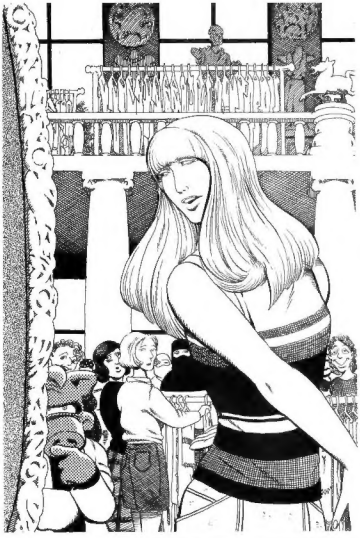
"She's basically an unhappy person," he said, "With the unhappy ones you've got to be **happy enough for two.** You're a naturally happy person and as long as you stay that way you should do fine.

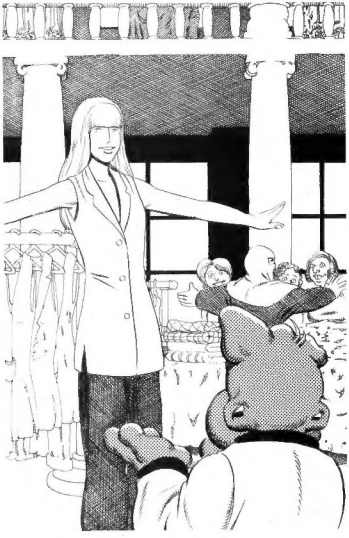
just be **happy every damn minute** of your waking life and you've **got her** for as **long as you want her**

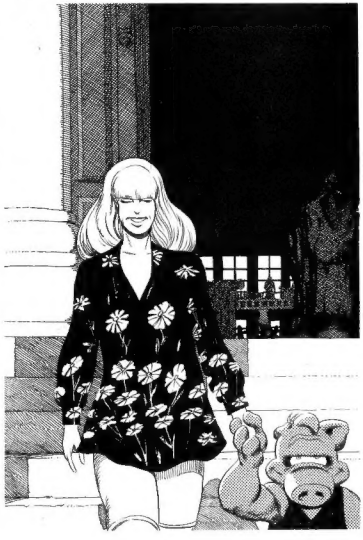

CLOTHING HUT
DISTRICT V SOUTH









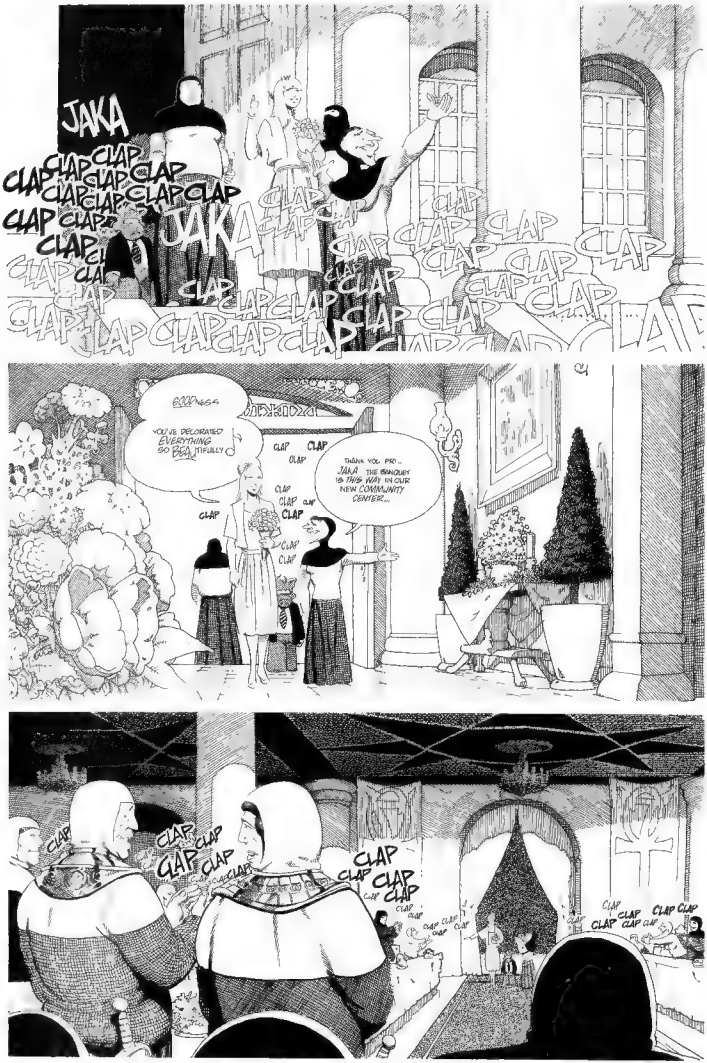


THE MOTHERS OF DISTRICT SIX ASKED ME TO EXTEND TO YOU THEIR VERY WARMEST REGARDS ... THEY'RE PLANNING A RECEPTION IF YOU ...
OH, DEAR -- PLEASE TELL THEM THANK YOU VERY, VERY MUCH
BUT I'M AFRAID WE JUST WANT A NICE, QUIET ROOM TO OURSELVES
WHAT ARE THESE "RECEPTIONS" THEY KEEP INVITING YOU TO?
THE RECEPTIONS?
EMBARRASSING IS WHAT THEY ARE ...

REALLY?
CEREBUS WANTS TO GO TO ONE
YOU
WHAT ON EARTH
CEREBUS ENJOYS ANYTHING THAT EMBARRASSES YOU
YOU KNOW THAT
HA HA HA HA
O-O-O KAY
DON'T SAY I DIDN'T WARN YOU, TAGLIONI
CEREBUS WILL TELL THE DRIVER YOU CHANGED YOUR MIND
TONIGHT!? OH HEAVENS DON'T BE SILLY.
IF I'M GOING TO A RECEPTION, I'M NOT GOING DRESSED LIKE THIS
MY. DEAR.
?

SHUH
JAKA
JAKA
EEEEE
JAKA
EEEEE! I'M PRINCESS PRINCESS!
JAKA
LOVELY!
GREAT WAS THE PRINCESSE
YETH!
JAKA!
JAKA
HA HA
WE'RE PLEASED SO JUST THAT YOU'RE HERE
WELL THANK YOU
WE LOVE YOU JAKA!
JAKA
JAKA
TOBY?
SEE THE PRINCESS TOBY? LOOK! LOOK!
DISTRICT SEVEN MOTHERS WELCOME
JAKA
Princess of Palnu
GOODNESS! YOU'RE ALL BEING SO NICE TO ME
I FEEL LIKE A QUEEN
HA HA HA

OH!
ZZZ


JAKA
CLAP
JAKA
GOOD MORNING
YOU'VE DECORATED EVERYTHING SO BEAUTIFULLY
THANK YOU, PRINCE JAKA THE BANQUET IS THIS WAY IN OUR NEW COMMUNITY CENTER...

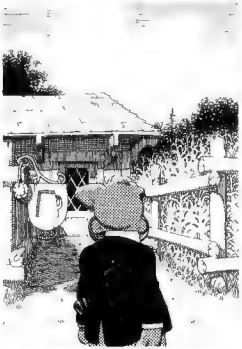
WOULD YOU EXCUSE US FOR JUST A MOMENT?
CERTAINLY
AHEM
CERTAINLY - LET ME TAKE THOSE FOR YOU
THANK YOU I'LL JUST BE A SECOND
CLAP CLAP CLAP
ZIP
CLAP CLAP CLAP CLAP CLAP CLAP CLAP CLAP
SO!
HAD ENOUGH?
CLAP? CLAP? CLAP? CLAP? CLAP?
OR DO YOU WANT TO STICK AROUND FOR THE "RAGGEDY BLOSSOM TO GRACE OUR FAIR COMMUNITY" SPEECHES?
NAY!
NAY
CEREBUS COULDN'T LISTEN TO THAT CRAP AND DIGEST A CUCUMBER SALAD AT THE SAME TIME
HA HA HA
CEREBUS IS GOING BACK TO THE SHEPHERD AND DOG FOR A FEW TOO MANY ALES...
REMEMBER NOW YOU - OFF FIRST
SO CEREBUS OWES YOU THREE BACK-RUBS
CLAP?
CLAP?
"YES, DEAR."

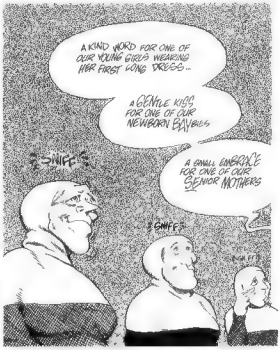
SHE WAS SOOOO BEAUTIFUL!
WISH I WOULDN'T HAVE TO BE INSIDE AT THAT BANQUET RIGHT NOW
OH! ME TOO!
THE RINGLETS BEHIND HER EAR!

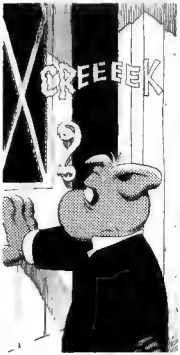
SPEAK FOR ALL OF US TODAY WHEN I SAY THAT WE HAVE RARELY - IF EVER EXPERIENCED SO WONDERFUL A

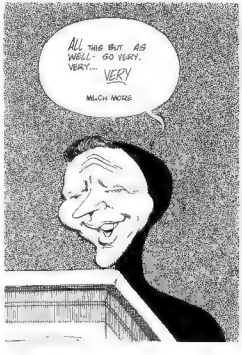
?
SHEPHERD and DOG

CLAP CLAP
CLAP CLAP
CLAP CLAP
CLAP CLAP
CLAP
CLAP
CLAP




A KIND WORD FOR ONE OF OUR YOUNG GIRLS WEARING HER FIRST LONG DRESS...
A GENTLE KISS FOR ONE OF OUR NEWBORN BABIES
A SMALL EMBRACE FOR ONE OF OUR SENIOR MOTHERS
SNIFF
SNIFF
SNIFF

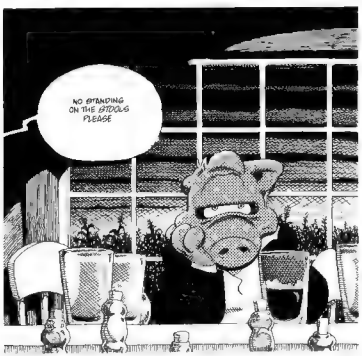

CREEEEK


ALL THIS BUT AS WELL - SO VERY, VERY... VERY
MUCH MORE

HELP YOU.
LARGE ALE
PLEASE

THROUGH HER EXAMPLE OF GRACE AND POISE, REMIND US - REMIND ALL OF US THAT OUR GREATEST POTENTIAL MIGHT YET BE UNREALIZED AND OUR GREATEST CHALLENGES MIGHT YET BE BEFORE US EVEN AS WE GATHER HERE TODAY IN FELLOWSHIP
IN SISTERHOOD
IN THAT GLORIOUS COMMONALITY

ANOTHER AWESOME STORY WHICH I DIDN'T I MIGHT SHARE WITH YOU ABOUT MY VISIT TO PA... SOME CAVE AND I SERIOUS NOT ME MARTIN MARIE MELISSA DIANA ELIZABETH BERTH RACHEL


NO STANDING ON THE STOOLS PLEASE

OUR MOST HONOURED GUEST - JAKA PRINCESS OF PALMA
CLAP CLAP CLAP CLAP CLAP CLAP

KNOW YOU ALL HAVE FAMILIES TO GET HOME TO - FAMILIES THAT LOVE YOU
WELL ..
ALMOST AS MUCH AS I LOVE YOU
AWW
AWWWW
SO IN CONCLUSION LET ME JUST SAY

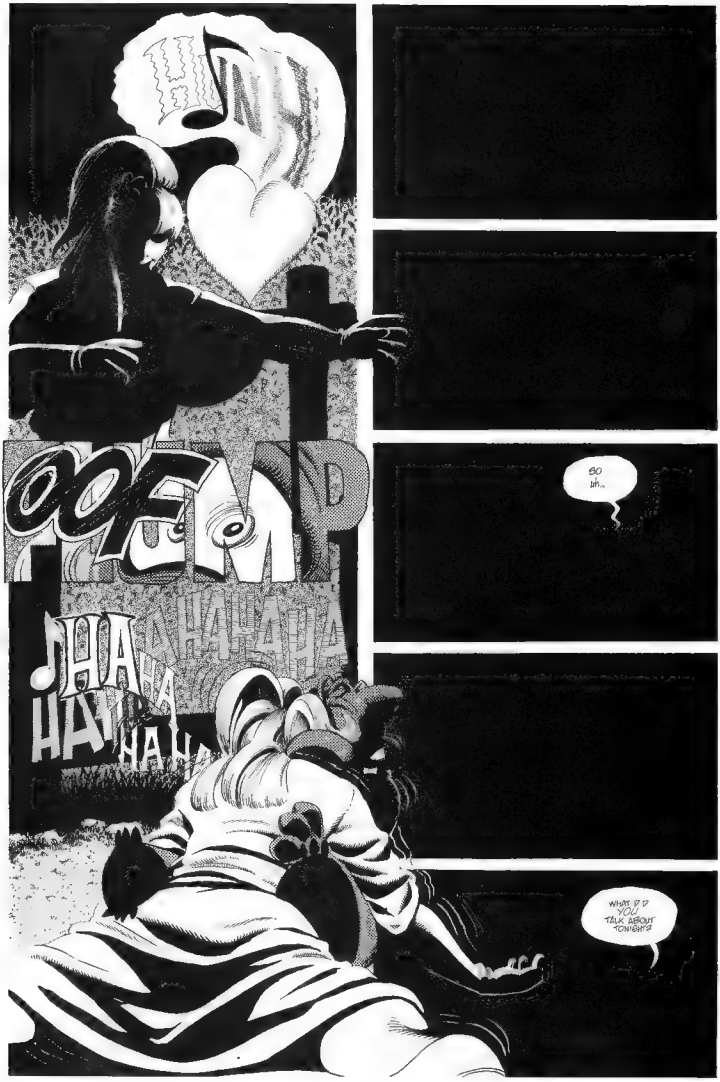
Belch

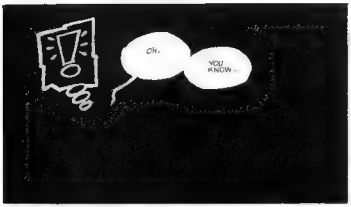
CLAP CLA
CLAP CL
LAP CLAP
CLAP CL
CLAP CL

YOU'RE THE COMPANION OF THE PRINCESS OF PELUVA
ARE YOU SERIOUS?
HUH?
OH
HEH HEH
AYE.
NO, HONESTLY, I JUST WANT TO STROLL BACK ON MY OWN AND ENJOY THE BEAUTIFUL EVENING
AH, YOU SAY, PRINCESS LAIKA THANK YOU SO MUCH AGAIN FOR COMING
OH!
IT WAS MY PLEASURE
GOOD NIGHT
HUH?
SAY YOU
ABOUT HERE?
FRIEND?
2
"SAY" ABOUT HERE? HOW DO YOU MEAN?
YOUR MAJESTY
GOODNESS
YOU STARTLED ME
SH!!
YOU ATTACKED ME. PLEASE JUST CALL ME
YOUR MAJESTY!
MMMM...
IS SHE SCORPION
OR LUNATIC
OR ANGEL
OR JUST A WOMAN?
YOUR MAJESTY THE MOTHER- OF THE PELUVIAN VALLEY ARE PREPARED TO SWEAR LOYALTY TO YOU AND LAUNCH THE RESURRECTION NOW

SAMHAIN
CAN'T TOO OLD. YOU MUCH HAS CHANGED YOU MUST AGREE TO
SOMETHING FELL
NO!
HERE! THOMAS!
I WARNED YOU ABOUT BOTHERING MY CUSTOMERS WITH THAT "PROPHET RICKE" BULLSHITE!
I MEAN
NO, THANK YOU
GET OUT!
BUT...
BANG!
NO NO! NOT YOU!
YOUR MASTER!
COME BACK!
I WAS TALKING TO THOMAS!

EEK!
AAK!
HNH
HUNH
HUNH


OOF
HA HA HA
so uh...
WHAT'D YOU TALK ABOUT TONIGHT?


OH..
YOU KNOW..

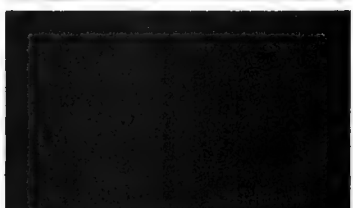
GIRL STUFF

WHAT DID YOU TALK ABOUT TONIGHT?

OH..

YOU KNOW..

GUY STUFF



AARDVARK COMMENT

Dear Dave,

You weenie. Snap out of it!

After the enormous volume of inspiration I've gathered from your work, I am sorry that my first letter to you begins like this, but I don't want to forget my purpose.

I was really looking forward to part three of "Mama's Boy" and reading more on your point of view. Instead you wasted it, giving up on the essay, complaining that nobody important listens or understands, and then defending this by publishing a letter from someone who often missed your point. It calls to mind the Nietzsche quote that warns a man to be careful when he goes to fight dragons lest he become one in the process.

After reading each issue with my wife (who loves the book), I always look forward to her huffing and then laying into criticism of your views. This doesn't always happen, but often enough that we can call it a rule. Then I say that I agreed with Dave's side on most of the provocative topics. This doesn't always happen, but often enough that we can call it a rule. And then we *discuss* it. Sometimes the emotional barbs come out as in any interaction when ego is allowed to hold sway. Sometimes we respectfully agree to disagree. Surprisingly often, though, we actually learn something from the other's views. It really is one of the wonders of my world: lying naked with a woman, talking about a little grey aardvark, and thinking fucking deep thoughts. Many thanks for that, by the way.

This is written because it seemed that you needed reminding that people who think your work is important couldn't imagine that you would need reminding that your work is important. Don't get mired down by any asshole who knows how to work a postage stamp.

Unsigned

(These are still "inventory Comments," as you can tell by the less-than-timely quality.) I had already "snapped out of it" by the time your letter came in, Unsigned. (May I call you "Un"? Thanks.) In fact, I had been kicking myself before *your letter came in for letting the inherent futility of trying to explain masculinity to a largely (?) androgynous audience "get to me" in print. And I had already resolved not to let it happen again. Your letter helped to reinforce that resolution, so thanks.*

I do appreciate your support of the book. Your comments seem to reflect much of my "Mr. and Mrs. Cerebus Fan" correspondence. (May I call your wife "Mrs.Un"? Pardon? No, sorry, I consider "Ms." an honorific that I reserve for women who have, in my opinion, moved beyond rhetorical feminism. Never having met your wife, it's impossible for me to know if, in my opinion, she would "fit the bill").

It may well surprise you to know, Mr. and Mrs. possibly Ms. — Un, that I lost most of a good night's sleep over this letter, knowing that I was going to spend most of this morning (most of a day, it turns out — and now I'm spending another morning revising my first draught) answering it. It really is one thing to put a letter like this aside "to be answered" and quite another thing to actually answer it.

The largest problem facing me was "do I want to play the diplomat with Mr. and Mrs — possibly Ms. — Un?" Practical business and authorial interest would certainly recommend diplomacy. In the former case because you buy Cerebus *and in the latter case because you* read Cerebus. *At the same time, diplomacy is very much an underlying irritant, causing, to a great extent, the aforementioned sense of futility.*

I do count myself lucky that — as yet — I am able to keep going with Cerebus. *While the fever-pitch animosity generated by 186 has by no means vanished, it has certainly abated. And — from what I can gather from my "Mr. and Mrs. Cerebus Fan" correspondence (I'm trying to put this as diplomatically as possible) — has been supplanted by the peculiar notion of* Cerebus *as an "intellectual marital aid," a philosophical dildo. Viagra for the testosterone-deficient marriage (in descending order of diplomacy, as it were).*

Un, I would really advise a greater degree of caution than your letter seems to exhibit. Agreeing with Dave Sim on "most of the provocative topics" — and doing so out loud to your significant other, given the unsound political climate of the waning minutes of the 20th Century — is, in my view, extremely reckless, if not foolhardy. It is certainly flattering (to her) for you to think that Mrs. — possibly Ms. — Un can "take it." But even if she is a "Ms. Un," you are counting very much on the... elasticity?... of her liberalism. Which is all well and good, but in my experience female liberalism extends only insofar as it advances the female agenda: bringing about gender interchangeability, the rendering of all morals as relative, all ethics as situational, all societal goals as collective, etc., etc. In my experience this holds true even for the rare, rare, rare female exceptions who are willing to follow an intellectual argument one or two baby steps past the point where it violates their inherent prejudices.

I'll admit that there's not enough information in your letter, Un, for me to make an informed guess about how big the hand grenade is that you're playing with, but let me add, as diplomatically as I can, that I believe you are playing with a hand grenade.

Structurally, I would say that the three categories you outlined ("agree to disagree," "emotional barbs," and "actually learn something") are deserving of percentages. If the first two categories add up to more than — say — 30%, I would guess that the hand grenade is a rather large one, and that it is just a matter of time before it goes off.

Please, please remember that after any lively discussion of the current issue of Cerebus, *Mrs. or Ms. Un returns to her societal context: conversations with her girl-*

friends, her female family members, her female co-workers, her feminized male friends, newspapers, magazines, television, movies, advertising, all militate in favour of the above-mentioned female agenda. These stimuli require (and in fact allow of) no intellectual strain, no soul-searching, no inward assessment, no ethical or philosophical solidity. Once you have chosen "merged permanence" with the collectivist sensibility, I think it is unwise to take sides "with most of the provocative" views of a lone dissenting voice. I believe women are, all exceptions duly granted, implicitly and explicitly collectivists. That is, the sensibility which seventy years ago wished to merge men and women under the umbrella label of "Workers"...

(let me parenthetically and petulantly add — since I am now well into my second day on this answer — that as soon as the gender-indistinguishable "Workers" were issued guns — i.e., the Spanish Civil War — they soon set about the task of burning churches and executing priests)

... and which (having failed in that effort) now wishes to homogenize men and women into "Humans," is (and I confess to an inability to entertain seriously dissenting views on the subject) female in nature. Given that their first loyalty is to that collectivizing impulse (and assuming that you wish your own "merging" to at least maintain the temporary illusion of "permanence"), you are working at cross-purposes to your own choice of lifestyle to set yourself in opposition to what everyone else tells Mrs possibly Ms —Un is so, what Mrs. — possibly Ms. -- Un must believe to retain her collectivist standing, what Mrs. possibly Ms .— Un Feels *to be true.*

One of the reasons that I am going on at such excruciating length about this is that I received a letter from a Mr Un some time ago, rhapsodizing about how the gender discussions in Cerebus *had brought about a new openness between him and Mrs Un, a real understanding and the plumbing of hitherto unrealized depths... It was followed about a month later by another letter informing me that they had gone their separate ways.*

I am willing to concede (based on my mail and convention experiences) that Cerebus *can be a sort of "marital aid," but only in two clearly defined contexts: one, if Dave Sim and his opinions are treated as if he was a once-a-month court jester who shows up to strut his buffoonery before the king and queen, and only if the king keeps a sharp lookout for changes in Her Majesty's mood and accommodates himself to them ("What a sillie foole, eh, My Dear?"); or two, if the king agrees with me tactically and then retreats to a blandified, compromised, wishy-washy, liberal position far, far, FAR closer to the prejudices of the Mrs or Ms. Un in question than to my own Anything else, Un, in my opinion, and you are courting disaster*

Which is not to say that I don't think I'm right. I mean, of course I do — why would I spend so much time trying to get the whole thing down on paper as accurately as I can, 21 years and counting, if I just intended to be a court jester or portray myself as a black sheep beside which -- to his significant other any *husband or boyfriend's fleece is going to be white as snow?*

So far as I know, I'm the only one who is discussing these issues and topics which are very much of interest to me, which are very important to me. I'm sure that the preponderance of female thought would be that I am just a minor league Rush Limbaugh, but I am very much satisfied that I am exerting my energies upon a finer and more subtle plane of philosophy than that. It is gratifying to me when young men write to express the view that they are inspired (in part) by what I write to aspire to become men, as opposed to becoming just another homogenized molecule adrift in the androgynous whirlpool at the center of our society's portrayal of itself (I'll leave the actuality an open question). Given sufficient time, energy, inclination, and balance, I'll flatter myself that Cerebus *can prove as useful to them as they indicate to me that it is — adapted to each individual purpose and filtered through each individual sensibility until it has become each individual's "own thing." I certainly try to make my work — my* real *work on the book itself and my conversational work (for want of a better term) here in the back of the book — as pointed and concise as I can make it. My intention (completely apart from the personal satisfaction of doing what I consider a "good job") is for both aspects of my work to resonate with men, to get them fired up creatively, intellectually, philosophically...maybe even spiritually, on occasion... in the same way that (as an example) Norman Mailer's work does for me. I finally found a copy of* Barbary Shore, *his much-maligned, universally panned second novel, and found it — as I expected — a very rich tapestry, brutally candid and powerful. Impolite, downright rude in parts, but with a razor's-edge quality that several times took my breath away.*

1951. Forty-seven fucking (pardon my French) years ago.

As I said, the book was universally panned and most of the reviewers took the trouble to eviscerate Mailer himself, as well as the book. Far from frightening him away from controversy, it solidified his conviction that the only sensible course of action was to sharpen his points and put a keener edge on his razor I have no way of knowing if Cerebus *is still going to be read fifty years from now, but whatever nebulous ambition I have in that area centers on inspiring men to see the value in the same course of action: sharper points and keener edges.*

Sorry, got a little long-winded there as I always do when talking about Mailer's work.

Given that motivation — sharper points and keener edges — I guess I'm just trying to give you the equivalent of the government health warning on cigarettes: CAUTION: DISCUSSION OF THE POINTS CONTAINED IN THIS CREATIVE WORK MAY BE HAZARDOUS TO YOUR MARRIAGE. *Of course, God gave me free will, the same as he did you. I would imagine, like most married chaps, you believe that love combined with honest intellectual discussion can improve a relationship, or help to maintain it, or not do too much damage to it You are free to believe that, just as I am free to believe that — given our, in my view, skewed societal context — nothing could be further from the truth. I certainly hope that men discuss* Cerebus *with each other, if they are inclined to. As any author does, I like to think*

all of my hours of work are worth discussing and that such discussions might bear creative or intellectual or philosophical fruit. But I don't launder my work to appeal to the dominant societal viewpoint, and I don't recommend discussions of Cerebus *across the divide between the genders for that reason.*

I apologize if my answer and my warning are insufficiently diplomatic in your view or in the view of any Mr. and Mrs. — possibly Ms. —Un reading this.

I also apologize for giggling to myself when I think of all the Mrs. — possibly Ms. — Uns who are going to be sure that it was their *Mr. Un who wrote your letter.*

* * * * * * * * *

"But how real is the mercy evoked by fictional dramas? The listener is not moved to offer help, but merely invited to feel sorrow; and the more intensely he feels it the more highly he rates the actor in the play. If these tragic human stories — whether referring to events long past or fictional — are played out in such a way that they fail to move the spectator to sadness, he walks out in disgust, criticizing the performance; but if he feels sad, he stays on, keenly attentive, and enjoys a good cry."

Augustine, *Confessions* (tr. Maria Boulding)

"Aesthetics is higher than ethics."

Oscar Wilde, *The Critic as Artist*

These two quotations came to my mind upon reading your "Annotated Hart" in *Cerebus #228*. Taking the first first:

The Augustine scenario specifically came to mind when I read your account of an imaginary "fantasist" who would like to perform selfless acts of heroism (though with the expectation of receiving acclaim) but would not give money to the homeless. "We do like to think ourselves merciful," Augustine says slightly later, and there's no doubt that such real-life scenarios have occurred many times. How many readers of any kind of fiction think of themselves as good and noble because they sympathize with a protagonist's troubles (be he Oedipus or Spider-Man), and then proceed to go out and screw real-life people needlessly? (This is not because said screw-ers want something the screw-ees have, but just for motives of jealousy, pettiness, or apathy.)

Basically, your critique and Augustine's both ask the supreme pragmatist question that generally gets leveled at some time at all forms of fiction: what good is it? The Roman poet Horace believed that good fiction had to both give pleasure and instruct: the former quality being the metaphorical "spoonful of sugar" that makes the medicine "go down." But as soon as you ask that pragmatic question, an empirical one arises along with it: how can you know if anyone has been instructed, and in what way? How much effect does any fictional endeavor have on how human beings conduct themselves within an ethical framework? In other words, who knows what good lurks in the hearts of men, and what, if any, works of fiction/religion/mythology helped it get there? Empirically speaking, nobody really knows — not you, not me, and not Augustine — whether more ethical enlightenment has been transmitted by the example of Christ, Superman, or Cerebus. (I realize Christ has a few years on the other two, so let's agree that we're talking a very figurative "more.") One man, on the basis of personal experience, asserts that he has found the average reader of *Cerebus* more ethical than the average reader of *Superman*. But such would be nothing more than a personal observation.

Now, your critique of superhero comics is nowhere near as extreme as Augustine's harangue. Augustine asks the "what good is it?" question because he wishes to discredit the spectatorial power that he admits the theatre has over him, in order to give primacy to his Christian belief. Believing in God's mercy was the supreme ethical injunction for him, and anything else was essentially a distraction. He simply was not interested in judging whether there might be both good and bad aspects to the theatre of his day, though some of those "fictional dramas" might now be rated as "high art." In contrast, though you critique the superhero genre — and, by extension, all or most heroic fiction — for implying that "superior power implies keener ethical insights," you do allow that some "chaps" may "apply it (the superhero fantasy) to their own lives at a more sensible level." The latter statement, I gather, would be your principal response to the "what good is it?" question, though I also assume that for you the good does not outweigh the potential evil. Yet, remembering that Augustine may have disregarded some of his time's finest theatre-art because any ethical value it had seemed paltry next to the revelation of Christ, it would seem that a purely ethical, purely sensible judgement of a literary work depends somewhat on whose ox is gored. One could mount a defense of *Oedipus Rex* based on its ethical importance to its culture, but I'm not sure Augustine would care.

This bring us to Quotation Number Two. One can't be sure how serious Wilde was in privileging "aesthetics" over "ethics" — he did defend *Dorian Gray* as possessing a "moral" — but much of his writing suggests that he was not very comfortable with regarding everything through the "what good is it?" lens. At the very least, it seems to me likely that he wanted to break down the general critical habit (still prevalent today) to assess everything, even fiction, in terms of utility or ethical instructional value. An emphasis upon aesthetics — however one chooses to define the term — makes it possible to assess the ways in which the work gives "pleasure" and what those pleasure-making elements tell us about ourselves. It's my own personal observation that no literary work achieves greatness without both aesthetic and ethical elements (which will of course be in varying proportions according to the artist's nature). Thus one can probably defend the *Oedipus* both on ethical and aesthetic grounds, though, again, neither argument would impress old Augustine.

Can comic-book superheroes (and, by extension, most heroic-adventure fictions) be defended ethically? Probably not. I don't think they're all quite the transparent power fantasies you allege them to be, but what ethical elements do appear in them are rudimentary, like a child's alphabet blocks, from which one can construct a few words but no sentences. Contrary to both you and Hart, I

don't think the main appeal of these fantasies is that of enforcing the "way-things-ought-to-be." I think that's a side dish, and the main course is the pure excitement of having one's interest engaged in a hero's travails and watching him win out over the forces that oppress him. Augustine's "fictional dramas" may not have assured any heroic triumph, but there can be little doubt that they use similar strategies to make an audience identify with a protagonist. Certainly many modern genres get away with as much with less rebuke: consider the Marx Brothers comedy *A Night at the Opera*. This is not a fair-minded exploration of "contending viewpoints," but an assault by liberating clowns on one-dimensional stock villains like Gottlieb the Snob and Lasparri the Cad.

Can superheroes and their ilk be defended aesthetically? I think so, whether one uses the mythopoetic methodology I favor or some other. But again — who cares, among either the fans or the detractors? The prospect of being a voice crying in the wilderness doesn't appeal to me any more than to you, so I probably won't attempt it. Probably each reader makes his own decision about how much to render to Caesar ("aesthetics") and how much to God ("ethics").

Once I've seen the whole "Mama's Boy" sequence, I'll probably have more comments on that. Stay funny.

Gene Phillips

Well, my own view is that the issues you raise have much to do with the "pecking order" I went on about at considerable length in the "Mama's Boy" series, except this seems to move us into the Pecking Order category of things. It seems to me that when I read Wilde's stuff — and particularly the, to me, misnamed "De Profundis" — he suffered from the inability to distinguish the "pecking order" (his writing peers, his influences like Swinburne and Ruskin on up to Shakespeare) from the Pecking Order (Jesus, St. Paul, Moses, Mohammed, etc.) and tended to identify himself with Christ, which, in my view, really helped to poison the 20th century with Zelda Fitzgerald asking Hemingway if he didn't think Al Jolson was greater than Jesus and John Lennon proclaiming the Beatles more popular than Jesus. My personal faith is to take the Islamic view that Mohammed was God's Last Messenger and Seal *of the Prophets (peace be upon him). Note the emphasis on Last and Seal, which is mine. It seems clear that we have been given all we need of God's scriptures and prophetic traditions. It starts with Genesis and ends with the 114th Sura in the Koran.*

Clear to me, but, as you've rightly pointed out, no one knows for sure.

Judaism, Christianity, and Islam have, as articles of faith, that there will be a Last Day, a Day of Judgement. Between the death of Mohammed in 632 and the Last Day, in my view, we are expected to get things right. Put it all together. I find the argument that we are expected to postpone *the Last Day a persuasive one. As a population, we are supposed to improve, become better. Mistakes that any one of us make in 1998, acts of bad faith, could have repercussions that would move Judgement Day up to, say, 2935 from, say, 3521. I really do believe that the picture is just that big and individual men's actions just that important. After 1400 years, I think it is silly to be waiting for the Messiah or another Prophet, another Bible or another Koran. That might very well be a blasphemous view — certainly according to orthodox Judaism it is the worst kind of blasphemy. A substantial Christian contingent who, for some reason, consider the Last Day to be a party they can't wait to get to would also deplore my view as pessimistic. Well, frankly, it gives me the willies when I see Christians who want the Last Day to be a week from Thursday. I mean, can you picture what a week from Thursday would be like if the Son of Man* did *appear in his glory over Jerusalem? And just was...*there*...for, say, two weeks? An unmistakable figure in kingly raiment? Not saying anything, not doing anything, just clearly and unmistakably visible on worldwide television LIVE FROM JERUSALEM? I would venture to say that it would be a pretty bouncy and blood-soaked two weeks, wouldn't you? I do believe it will happen, but ten thousand years from now is plenty soon enough for me, speaking personally.*

Taking things down several hundred thousand notches from Judgement Day, I can certainly see how an argument could be made that even an unethical work (my opinion again) like "De Profundis" can have value as a kind of spiritual Rorschach Test.

Better example maybe: I have seen the movie Slaughterhouse Five *more times than I can count. It's one of my favourites. I just watched it for the first time since reading the Bible and the Koran. What had always appealed to me as a neat, mature science-fiction film...about an amiable societal misfit...suddenly transformed itself before my eyes and ears into a tightly centered ethical story at the point where the German prison guard gives Billy a woman's coat and he finds a diamond hidden in the lining. I mean, chills went up my spine. "That's wrong, Billy. That belonged to a Jewish woman who was gassed and cremated. It is not a marble you found on the ground." Everything from that point on follows logically, metaphorically, and allegorically from the central act of bad faith. Kurt Vonnegut certainly assumed a new stature in my assessment of him as an author. I admire the ability to tell an effective story with a solid ethical foundation, and I relish it when I run across one. Spiritually and philosophically, I would have to side with St. Augustine, if only because the proliferation of creativity is always going to favour "circuses" over "bread," and thus tend to distract from, obscure, or marginalize the genuine Spirituality of the Bible and the Koran*

I mean, I'm going to keep doing Cerebus, *but it wouldn't surprise me to find out that having Cerebus to show for twenty-six years of my life isn't going to score me any major brownie points in the Great By-and-By. Or possibly it could, but perhaps only indirectly because I was reasonably harmless by spending twenty-six years watching my right hand make pictures and not getting myself into trouble while I was doing so. Of course, it also wouldn't surprise me to find out that I'll also be accountable for anyone that I influenced and will have to smoke a turd in hell for whatever part I played in Todd*

McFarlane deciding to use self-published creative freedom to do the (to say the least) ethically unsound Spawn. *Much as I like Todd personally.*

All entertainment and art, to me, are contained in the "pecking order" of the largely (if not wholly) inconsequential and irrelevant — Kurt Vonnegut, Cerebus, A Midsummer Night's Dream, Valley of the Dolls, *the Spice Girls, Pavarotti. It's all post-632, and whatever perceived merit each of them has is so far below the Consequence and Relevance of God's Messengers and Prophets that it really seems to amount to a "least rotten apple" competition, with the "rotten apples" proliferating like crazy and obscuring the Central Gems of genuine philosophy and spirituality.*

Of course, just to gore your own favourite ox, Gene, I'd have to say that I tend to see Myths and myths and "myths" as being in the same category. This is just personal opinion, but I think drawing parallels between, say, Herakles and Jesus is just as damaging, just as myopic, just as irrelevant — and quite possibly more destructive and along much the same lines — as saying Al Jolson is greater than Jesus or the Beatles are more popular than Jesus. The latter case, as I said, seems to indicate a very low horizon of thought, an intellectual and spiritual bankruptcy which leads to art and entertainment being raised up in the public consciousness and God's Prophets and Messengers lowered in the public consciousness until a kind of de facto equivalency is "achieved." Not altogether different from Caligula appointing his horse to the Roman Senate.

If, as a society, we choose to be that stupid, well, that's just the sort of stupid society we're going to deserve and get, in my opinion.

But, for intelligent people — and I've always considered you a very intelligent person, Gene — to see Moses or Jesus as the end product of mythopoetic traditions, fictional characters raised above Spider-Man and Tarzan only by literary pedigree, seems to me to be a first intellectual failure and leads to (again, to me) poisonous and dangerous references such as "the authors of the Bible." The Bible was "authored" only if you presuppose the non-existence of God, which, with the evidence at hand, I don't think any seriously intelligent person could do. Why is it so much easier to believe in Christianity surviving and flourishing for two thousand years because it won a kind of "religion lottery" with billion-to-one odds against it than it is to believe that the Creator Willed Christianity's survival and success to be so?

On the mythopoetic front, I see nothing wrong with pithy analyses of Diana and Zeus and Hermes, comparing them to Wonder Woman, Superman, and the Flash. To me, they are birds — not Birds — of a feather. But to try and render a construction of that kind which would include Moses, Ruth, Job, Jesus, Mohammed, and the other luminaries of God's prophetic traditions, in my opinion, is self-exalting and infantile. Thanks, as always, for a very thoughtful letter, Gene.

* * * * * * * * *

Dear Mr. Sim,

I wanted to write you to tell you how much I am enjoying *Cerebus*. I've been reading comics for about 20 years now and am ashamed to admit that it took me this long to finally give your series a try. My wife bought me the first *Cerebus* "phone book" this past Christmas. I pointed it out to her one day when she was brave enough to go with me to my favorite comics shop (Eide's Entertainment here in Pittsburgh — I believe you visited the store a few years back). She mentioned she thought it looked interesting — which, from her, is quite a compliment for a comic book.

Well, needless to say, I am now hooked on the series and glad to be. I went out and have so far purchased the first eight volumes (up to *Women*) and am up to the second volume of *Church and State* in my reading. Not too bad a start since Christmas. I know you've received countless compliments for your work, all well deserved and much more eloquent than I can hope to be. But it was important for me to let you know anyway. I don't know how much feedback you've gotten on the reprint volumes, but without them I'm not sure I'd have given your work a chance. It would have been too hard, or more likely too intimidating, to jump midway into the story. I'm sure one of your main purposes was to bring in new readers. Well, it worked for me.

Picking up *Cerebus* was just what I needed to reignite my interest in comics, as well. It seems like every four or five years comics will hit a lull for me. I begin to wonder if maybe I'm becoming too old for them or just growing weary of the medium. But then something comes along like *Watchmen, Nexus,* or *Sin City,* and my interest is revitalized. *Cerebus* has done this for me. I'm as excited starting a new chapter of the story as I can ever remember being about any other comic. Thanks again.

One other thing I wanted to ask you about. I picked up a *Cerebus Jam* with the last TPB and saw in it that you sold your original pages to *Cerebus*. I was wondering if you still do. If so, I'd love to be able to purchase a page or cover. I also ran across a *Marvel Fanfare* issue you did that had pinups of various characters. I loved the Iron Man piece where he was passed out with a bottle nearby. So, if you would consider selling me a piece of your art, I would be grateful.

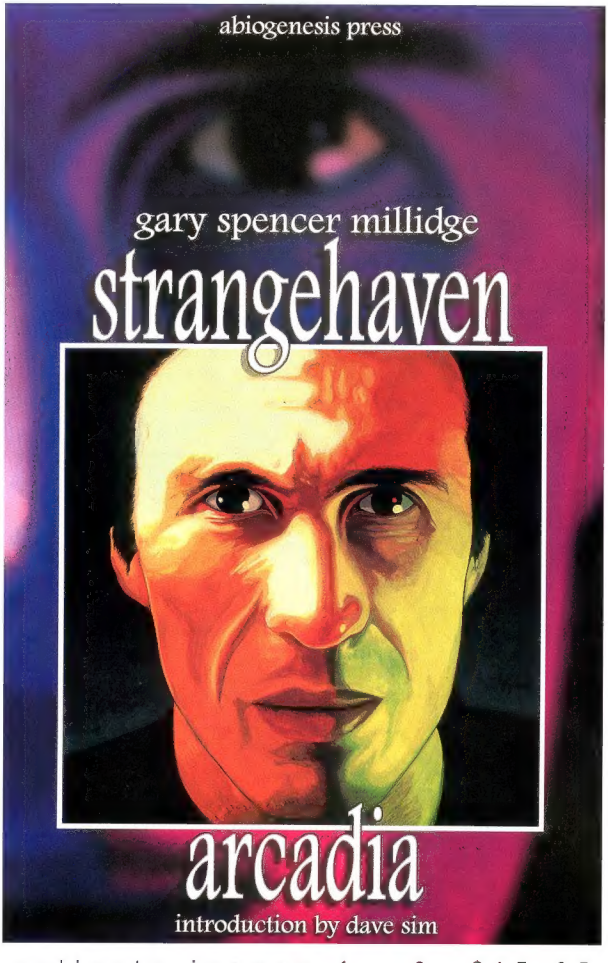
Once again, thanks for all your hard work. I'm now on board. I've got a little catching up to do, but I'll be there soon.

All my Best,
Mark Tomlinson
201 Robinhood Lane
McMurray, PA 15317

Welcome aboard, and be sure to tell your wife I said "thanks."

We're still trying to figure out some equitable way of selling the artwork, but I have to say that, for both Ger and myself, trying to maintain the quality on the book and keep to the monthly schedule really supersedes all other considerations by a very, very wide margin. If we do get around to it, we'll mention something in the back of the book here.

PLUGOLA



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